

(U) Zelda Column: Is Gossip Getting Your Goat?

FROM: 'Zelda,' Dispenser of Advice for SIGINTers on Workplace Issues

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(U) Editor's comment: In this month's column, Zelda weighs in on wagging tongues in the workplace... The below column is unclassified in its entirety.



Dear Zelda,
Do men gossip and backbite in their workspace among each other? I notice women tend to do so. How do you try to convince people this can be counterproductive to teamwork?

-- Sensitive in SID

Dear Sensitive,
Do men gossip? You better believe they do! One of the biggest gossips I know is a man. Although women tend to get that label more often (perhaps because we communicate more frequently), gossiping and backbiting are not limited to the female of the species. But you are right about one thing -- it is counter-productive to teamwork and can erode morale.

I think the most effective way to deal with a gossiper is at the grassroots level. If no one in the office will listen to her (or his) gossip, the backbiter will have no audience. Next time you find yourself immersed in one of these slander sessions, say something along the lines of "I'm not comfortable talking about Jim behind his back" and walk away. With any luck, others will take the hint and follow you.

If you supervise a Gossip Girl, hold a counseling session and let her know it is unacceptable workplace behavior. Explain the harmful effects of gossip and backbiting, and tell her that if she has an issue with Jim she should approach him directly, rather than griping about him behind his back. If the behavior continues, begin the disciplinary process. And most of all, set the example by not engaging in gossip yourself.

Now, a certain amount of rumor-mongering in the workplace is unavoidable; it's just human nature. Rumors, per se, are not necessarily bad; after all, "RUMINT" is often how people get their first tip-off that organizational change is about to occur. But malicious gossip or backbiting is never appropriate at work, and the supervisor should take action if office gossip interferes with productivity, hurts people's feelings or reputations, erodes morale, or damages interpersonal relationships (teamwork).

If gossip is rampant in your organization, examine the causes: not enough work to keep people busy? management not sharing information? a problem employee not being dealt with by the supervisor? Sometimes gossip is a symptom of a bigger problem.

So keep an ear out for malicious or excessive gossip, and take action to curtail it. Supervisors --

model good communication practices so that gossip becomes unnecessary in your organization. Let's leave the grapevine to the vintners.

Selma
